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Urban fragments: a subaltern studies imagination

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In this chapter I argue that the idea of the 'fragment' in Subaltern Studies offers useful resources for how we understand the making of urban knowledge and theory. While there is a productive history of attempts to use Subaltern Studies in urban research (eg Chattopadhyay, 2012; Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2011), there has been little consideration of what the idea of the fragment might offer. Instead, most discussion has remained focussed on the category of 'subaltern', related to but not equivalent to the idea of the fragment. This, I hope to show, is a missed opportunity for urban research. I will argue that there are useful conceptual guides in what I call a 'subaltern studies imagination' of the fragment for how we think about the project of urban theory and knowledge-making.

I begin by exploring the broad influence of Subaltern Studies on Urban Studies, and highlight three issues as especially important: the subaltern as *a relation to 'popular' political struggle*; subaltern as simultaneously *an epistemology of the urban subject and ethical challenge of representation*; and subaltern as a name for *the limits of urban theory* rather than spaces of urban marginality alone. While the dialogue between subaltern and urban studies has been a rich and creative one, there has been no substantive consideration of how the idea of the fragment in subaltern studies might be used in urban research. Second, I examine how the fragment is understood in some Subaltern Studies accounts before, third, comparing this with how the fragment is often understood in Urban Studies. The chapter ends with a consideration of what a subaltern studies imagination of the fragment might offer urban research.

Subaltern Studies and Urban Studies

Subaltern Studies, like Urban Studies, is a theoretically diverse set of debates (Chaturvedi, 2012). Indeed, the lack of any clear 'subaltern theory', as Vivek Chibber (2013) amongst others have argued, has often been viewed as a weakness in prominent critiques of the literature. While subaltern studies has always been focussed on some key categories - such as the problem of how to identify and understand different forms of agency, subject position and hegemony historically - theoretically this body of work increasingly diversified over time, taking it beyond its Gramscian and economic focus to include various strands of postructuralist and cultural theory, in some cases as an explicitly Marxist project, and at others as a decisive break from Marxism. This theoretical multiplicity echoes the proliferation of approaches in urban studies, and has itself shaped the patchwork take up of subaltern studies in urban studies research, in which the key influences have probably been Dipesh

Chakrabarty's writings on provincialisation, Partha Chatterjee's writings on political society, and Gayatri Spivak's conception of the subaltern.

Subaltern studies has had an influence on urban studies in two broad ways: first, as part of a wider influence of postcolonial thought on research (e.g. Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Robinson, 2006; Sidaway *et al*, 2014); and, second, as a more specific attempt to work with particular subaltern studies theorists or conceptualisations (e.g. Chattopadhyay, 2012; Gidwani, 2008, 2012; Roy, 2011). Three uses stand out: subaltern as *a relation to 'popular' political struggle*; subaltern as simultaneously *an epistemology of the urban subject and ethical challenge of representation*; and subaltern as a name for *the limits of urban theory* rather than spaces of urban marginality alone.

For Swati Chattopadhyay (2012: 251-252), in her reconceptualization of infrastructure in relation to contemporary urbanism in India, subaltern practices exist on the "edges of visibility", beyond definition and representation and in excess of authority, but can become 'popular' and visible to state and capital as they become agents of social change. She draws on a rich array of routes through which this might take place, from familiar cultural practices like cricket and puja festivals or more explicitly political cultural acts like political wall writing or some forms of vehicular art. These practices can take ordinary spaces such as streets, neighbourhoods, walls or trucks and turn them, temporarily, into "spatial fragments" that belong "neither to the everyday nor to the exceptional…[they are] created out of a series of conjunctures, of bodies and objects, movements and views, noise and warmth, walls and roads, events and memories" (*ibid*, 119). For Chattopadhyay, in the spaces and switches between subaltern and popular, facilitated in part by these processes of urban fragment-making, lie a reconceptualization of infrastructure - as vital infrastructures of urban change - and a challenge to how urban theory might "unlearn the city" (*ibid*, 252).

Vinay Gidwani (2008, 2009, 2013; forthcoming), has reflected on the appeal of 'subaltern' in his work, and usefully identifies two senses that are deeply entwined: *epistemological* and *ethical*. Epistemologically, his work has examined how the subaltern subject, for example in relation to his work on urban waste and livelihoods, is "enabled to act (or desist) as the 'author of its initiatives' – that is, the double sense of "subject" (*in subjection to* and *subject of*)" (forthcoming; Gidwani and Reddy, 2011). Ethically, and here Gidwani chimes with a wider sense in which subaltern debates have impacted methodological and representational concerns in urban studies, Spivak's argument that to confront the subaltern is both to represent others and to represent ourselves is vital. This, as Gidwani (forthcoming) writes, creates a 'double bind' or 'nonpassage': "He who represents and she who is represented (I use these pronouns merely to underscore the asymmetry and paternalism that Spivak urges constant vigilance against) are in a double bind: an *aporia* (Greek, *a* + *poros* = nonpassage) that

both must confront, but especially those who are structurally positioned to represent (and therefore, act as representatives)" (and see Jazeel, 2014, 2015; Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010).

Ananya Roy (2011), also drawing on Spivak, makes a different argument. While Roy (2011: 235) is sympathetic to research that locates the subaltern in the urban slum of the megacity, she looks to shift subaltern urbanism beyond forms of thinking that "assign unique political agency to the mass of urban subalterns". The subaltern, she argues, is not located in any pre-given territory, nor simply to be found in politically subversive practices. Writing against what she calls "ontological and topological readings of the subaltern", for Roy the subaltern is a more generalised category that "marks the limits of archival and ethnographic recognition" (p231). Roy seeks to expand the realm of what she calls 'subaltern urbanism' by, for example, examining how practices too often attributed to the slum alone, such as informal patterns of urban inhabitation, are also to be found in state planning processes.

These three senses of the subaltern in urban studies – as a political struggle, as an epistemic and ethical challenge of researching urban space and subjects, and as a limit point not just of a group or a space but of urban theory more generally – mirror wider debates in the social sciences and humanities around how to define, conceptualise, research, and think politically about what has long been a slippery and daunting concept. Each of the accounts work with distinct definitions of the subaltern, but at least two cross-cutting issues emerge: first, a concern with the importance of representation, including who does the representation as much as who/what is being represented, and, second, a concern with what those representations might mean for how we understand contemporary urbanism. There has, however, been less consideration of what the notion of the 'fragment' in subaltern studies might mean for urban studies.

What I take from these accounts is less a concern with pinpointing the specificity of the subaltern, and more a challenge for how we encounter and conceptualise urban multiplicity and difference. In particular, there is value for urban studies in what I am calling here a 'subaltern studies imagination', i.e. a focus on different ways of being, thinking, acting, producing knowledge, and making spaces that lead us to critically reflect on how 'the urban' is represented and understood in urban studies. This imagination is alert to the challenge of the subaltern – i.e. to that which is barely visible, and which exists beyond dominant forms of knowing urbanism – but it seeks a wider canvas that exceeds the subaltern itself. It takes the concern with how we represent to include the kinds of status we in urban studies grant to marginalised urban spaces more generally, spaces that are themselves not necessarily subaltern but are nonetheless undervalued in the challenges they bring to mainstream urban theory. A subaltern studies imagination, as I will argue, brings an analytical strategy to these fragments, which

includes an approach to how we think about the relation between the general and the particular, the continuous and the episodic, and to both the content and style of abstraction that we put to work.

Subaltern Studies and the fragment

The 'fragment' plays an important role in subaltern studies. Fragments of knowledge are fundamental to the subaltern studies project because they present tantalising clues to other histories and to new forms of conceptualisation and methodology, often hinted at in archival research but speaking to a different way of conceiving some of the basic categories of historical investigation, including agency, struggle, insurgency, consciousness, politics, class, even history itself. At stake in attending to fragments is not empirical variation alone, but new 'vantage points'. As Vinayak Chaturvedi (2012: x) has argued, in the early work of subaltern studies, for instance in the work of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and David Arnold, there was a belief in the early work that "meticulous thick descriptions of insurgency could disclose the otherwise concealed political character of peasant consciousness by reconstructing the vantage point, the spontaneous ideology of the peasant rebel". The aim is not to uncover an 'authentic' peasant consciousness – there isn't one - but instead to try to understand multiple and sometimes incommensurable ways of being, perceiving and becoming political that open out to other histories, entangled though they were with Histories of the state, capital, and colonial modernity.

Partha Chatterjee (1993), for example, uses the idea of 'fragment' in *The Nation and its Fragments* as a short-hand for forms of difference and resistance in Bengal that cannot be adequately understood within mainstream representations of nationalism. Conventional accounts of the struggle for Indian Independence and the formation of the modern nation either excluded or actively subordinated fragments around caste, gender and religion (especially Islam), missing the ways in which anti-colonial projects often operated with referent points outside of largely European understandings of categories like 'nation' and 'modern' and 'community'. Gyanendra Pandey (2006), in *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, focuses on more contemporary versions of Indian nationalism to show how nationalist discourse can be used to spark violence against minority groups. Pandey shows, for example, how minority groups are recovered as the targets of incorporation, including Dalits, who are incorporated in ways that reproduce caste hierarchy rather than in ways that seek to challenge it. As Pandey (1991: 559) elsewhere wrote: "The 'fragments' of Indian society—the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, activist women's groups, all of which might be said to represent 'minority' cultures and practices—have been expected to fall in line with the 'mainstream' (Brahmanical Hindu, consumerist) national culture." It is these minority groups that constitute the fragments in Pandey's critique of Hindu nationalism, and in this sense there is a broad

similarity between Chatterjee and Pandey's account of how certain discourses of nationalism can serve variously to exclude and subordinate particular ways of knowing or forms of identity.

A fragment is marked out as such in these accounts by Chatterjee and Pandey in two broad ways. First, because of its position to or within a wider set of political, social and cultural power relations. Fragments emerge in the making of dominant national cultures, and can therefore shift over time depending on how that process changes. Second, the fragment can be a form of expression, whether a piece of drama or a collection of poems or a political protest, that presents clues to a different way of understanding history, or the nation, or community, or citizenship. Both these conceptions of the fragment are often found together in Subaltern Studies work and they are of course closely inter-related.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) locates subaltern struggle in relation to the 'fragmentary and episodic', rather than the pre-given abstractions of the general and continuous routinely put to work by historians. Antonio Gramsci (1971) is an important influence on Chakrabarty here. For Gramsci the aim was for the subaltern, working with the revolutionary intellectual, to transcend subalternity by becoming a unified political force that can better understand and challenge power and the state. For Chakrabarty, however, it is important analytically and politically to stay with those forms of subaltern struggle that do not coalesce into a cohesive force – this, after all, is partly what marks those struggles out as subaltern. "Can we imagine another moment of subaltern history", writes Chakrabarty (2002: 34-35), "where we stay – permanently, not simply as a matter of political tactics – with what is fragmentary and episodic, precisely because that which is fragmentary and episodic does not, cannot, dream of the whole called the state and therefore must be suggestive of knowledge-forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state?"

Notice here that Chakrabarty connects 'fragment' and 'whole'. But it is a whole, for subaltern political agitators at least, that remains obscured. Subaltern struggle cannot "dream of the whole", and so they are fragments in two senses: first, in their status as marginalized or silenced forms of knowledge and episodic political action on the edges of conventional historical archives; and second, because they are animated not by critique of a conventional political whole where the state in particular is vital, but by different centers of gravity. The 'knowledge-forms' of subaltern struggle cannot dream the whole because they operate with a different referent point to struggles that focus on the state. There may be other wholes at work in these imaginaries, but for Chakrabarty (2002: 274), it is important analytically to stay with the fragment without recourse to the whole. In this sense he wants to push the notion of fragment to disrupt commonplace conceptions of both the fragment and the whole: "Not 'fragmentary' in the sense of fragments that refer to an implicit whole but fragments that

challenge not only the idea of wholeness but the very idea of the 'fragment' itself", because if the fragment is not framed as part of a whole then it needs to be understood differently, as an abstraction that challenges, contests and pushes different theoretical positions. Similarly, for Gyanendra Pandey (2006: 296), the fragment is not just "a 'bit' – the dictionary's 'piece broken off' – of a preconstituted whole".

But there is a third sense in which Chakrabarty uses 'fragment': as an orientation toward the social world as beyond any one system of representation. For Chakrabarty, fragments are provocations that demand recognition that the world is more than simply 'plural', but is "so plural as to be impossible of description in any one system of representation" – instead, the challenge is to "learn from the subaltern" – or, as we might put it here, to *learn from the fragment*: "To go to the subaltern in order to learn to be radically 'fragmentary' and 'episodic' is to move away from the monomania of the imagination that operates within the gesture that the knowing, judging, willing subject always already knows what is good for everybody, ahead of any investigation" (2002: 275). The fact that Chakrabarty's fragments are episodic brings an important temporal dimension to his critique of singular systems of representation. The systems of representation he critiques are not just spatially and socially encompassing in their claims to see the world and its future, but temporally encompassing too: they are driven by an arc of history telling at the level of the broad sweep, the large-scale shift, and are ill-equipped to see episodic actions, despite the fact these episodic actions recur over time.

The claim from Chakrabarty is that thinking of politics in relation to the fragment provides a suggestive lure to other ways of thinking about the political. The fragment here is no mere side-story to the grand arc of political struggle. In fact, the fragment calls into question the grand arc of politics, which Chakrabarty locates here as a narrow representation of the political that links it to conceptions of unified state-focussed struggle. The fragment then is both an empirical operator and a conceptual operator. Empirical because it refers to particular kinds of episodic struggle that reflect different ways of knowing and practising politics from accounts focussed on unified struggle that questions and seeks to transform the state ('the whole'). Conceptual because the fragment is used both to ask us to avoid the risk of incorporating difference too quickly within existing conceptual formulations of the political, and because it used as a basis to open out other ways of conceptualising political knowledge, practice and thinking.

Chakrabarty has lots of examples in mind. He mentions for instance Gyan Prakash's (1990) book on bonded labour in Bihar, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, and uses it to argue that some peasant knowledge-forms in colonial India understood power not in relation to the state, labour and class struggle, but to ghosts and spirit cults. However, such accounts tend to be

understood through the prism of a system of representation that takes the modern subject and political struggle as an implicit framing device, meaning that peasant knowledge-forms and (episodic) political action always remain analytically and politically subordinate to the modern. The scope for peasant knowledge-forms to enter into and dominate the nature of the modern as knowledge, practice and politics are unimaginable in these systems. We might think of these accounts as traces, as Chakrabary (1996: 60) does in his argument that histories of heterogeneous subaltern labour can only be located in narratives of capitalist transition as a Derridean trace "that constantly challenges from within capital's and commodity's – and by implication History's – claim to unity and universality" (and Derrida, 1976, 1981). As with a trace, a fragment both contains the marker of that which it is not, an absent presence that influences but does not delimit its form, and points to the gap between the representable and the non-representable (Napolitano, 2015). But, more than a trace, Chakrabarty (2002) positions fragments signalling more than absence. Fragments play a vital role in the generation of new ways of seeing history and the agents of change. Fragments lure attention by saying something new and/or neglected outside the usual optics of seeing history. Similarly, for Gyan Pandey (2006: 66-67), the fragment has the potential to act as "a 'disturbance', a contradiction… in the self-representation of that particular totality and who uncritically uphold it". The fragment is "an appeal": to an alternative possibility or perspective, a marker of the "fragility and instability of the 'givens'" (*ibid*).

The subaltern nature of any act or group or individual or space is an empirical question and cannot be defined in advance other than to say that it is that which, as Roy (2011: 231) has put it drawing on Spivak, exists beyond recognition and identification and "marks the silences of our archives and annals". Of course, the tendency to equate subaltern with a more generalised conception of the marginalised has been one of the flashpoints of debate around the use and potential of the category of subaltern. Rather than conflate the two, fragment is a wider category that names a series of socially marginalised spaces that may or may not be subaltern and which are both increasingly important to the constitution of urban life yet often unaccounted for in the run of most urban studies debate.

Here an important lesson from subaltern studies lies in the risk of celebrating the fragment. The fragment may well be an analytically disruptive force, but this does not mean that the fragment itself constitutes an emancipatory space. The aim cannot surely be then to align with efforts to incorporate subalternity within existing dominant frames of, for instance, the entrepreneurial citizen (see, for example, Ananya Roy, 2010, on microcredit, subjectivity, and 'poverty capital'), or for example in efforts to incorporate immigrant groups into dominant visions of nationality with their associated codes, sensibilities and ways of being (e.g. Bagelman, 2013; Darling, 2014; and see Spivak, 1993). Such

fragments, either on their own terms or in dialectic relation with dominant forms of power and representation, should not be romanticised. And yet, an important lesson from subaltern studies here is that we cannot simply step around the problem of incorporation, it lurks always in the background as part of the politics of representation, as a delicate line and inescapable dialectical tension between and comprehending the significance of a fragment and incorporating it within existing frames.

Having examined some of the ways in which the fragment is used in subaltern studies, I will now examine its potential in urban research. In order to do that, we need to foreground how the fragment is currently understood in urban research in order to identify points of critical dialogue for future research.

The fragment in Urban Studies

In contemporary urban research the fragment is put to work in a range of ways. It is used in a general sense to describe urban *process and form*, where fragmentation is the process and linked to capitalist urbanization, and fragment is the form. Here, we see fragmentation and fragment used in relation to a wider family of terms, not least 'splintering', linked to Graham and Marvin's (2001) defining image of urbanism, but also in relation to a variety of other forms, from gated enclaves and gentrified neighbourhoods to different forms of sociospatial polarisation and post-justice urbanism, as well as historical processes linked to colonial forms of *cordon sanitaire* and 'archipelago' or 'medieval' urbanism (e.g. AlSayyad and Roy, 2006; Bakker, 2003; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Caldiera, 2000; Lees *et al*, 2008; McFarlane, 2008; Macleod and McFarlane, 2014; Mitchell, 2001; Smith, 1996). In each of these accounts, there is a specific relation between fragmentation, fragment, and whole at work. In general terms, however, the tendency is to link fragmentation and the whole through processes of capitalist urbanization. Henri Lefebvre (2003, 1991) provides perhaps the most compelling example in this tradition. For example, in both *The Production of Space* and in *The Urban Revolution*, capitalist urbanization is explicitly conceived as a whole, but a whole that is not only productive of the fragmentation of urban space, but which *actively requires* the fragmentation of urban space in order to sustain itself (for instance in terms of the geographical placing of labour, or the targeting of specific spaces in the city for accumulation and speculation).

In these urban accounts, the fragment and the whole are thought and related in radically different ways to those of Chakrabarty. These accounts tend to position the fragment as a product of the whole, where the whole is a system of representation linked to capitalist modernization, and in particular to categories of class, labour, land, and infrastructure. The key spheres through which the urban is understood to become fragmented in these accounts include neoliberalism, gentrification, the

proliferation (or resurgence) of gated communities, the commodification of public space, and the deepening of class inequalities. I do not, to be clear, raise this point as a criticism of this work. This literature is vital analytically and politically. But it is important to note that this is quite a particular way of seeing fragments and their production which emerges from quite a narrow range of systems of representation, despite the differences between the accounts above. The question that Chakrabarty asks us to raise is what does this stop us from seeing?

In this context, there is an important connection between Chakrabarty's conception of the fragment and some strands of urban studies. Consider this claim from Edgar Pieterse (2011: no pagination), writing about cities in Africa, where he pronounces a certain faith in spaces often at the margins not of everyday life in urban Africa, but of urban theory: "I have no doubt that the street, the slum, the waste dump, the taxi rank, the mosque and church will become the catalysts of an unanticipated African urbanism". By 'catalyst', I take it that Pieterse is referring to both progressive forms of politics in African cities, and to new ways of conceptualising African cities outside the usual referent points (accounts, for instance, of the state and policy). To take another example, writing about urban wastepickers in municipal garbage grounds in India, Vinay Gidwani (2013) suggests that theory could be enriched by attending more closely to the lifeworlds of wastepickers and their interconnections to spatially distanciated relations of capital, labour, and urbanism. In such spaces there may be sources for new ways of thinking about urbanism and political change which we might think of, to use a phrase of Gidwani's, as a "conjuring of the positive": "I take this conjuring of the positive from what has been cast aside—marginalized, remaindered, and stigmatized – as the primary intellectual and political task of the postcolonial scholar as archivist of the city".

There are a lot of different social forms being highlighted here – taxi ranks, garbage grounds, Mosques, informal settlements, streets, etc. Some of these have long played a prominent role in the history of mainstream urban theory, especially the street but also, in quite different forms and registers, the 'slum' (or 'ghetto', or 'informal settlement', etc). I am not claiming that these are all 'fragments'. Instead, I argue that it is useful to keep a hold of a 'subaltern studies imagination' (I will explain this term in the next section) of the fragment as a marker of the edges of how cities and the urban are understood and represented - ways of living and being and imagining and making the city that have been at the margins or even invisible to much of urban studies, and which may point to new kinds of knowledge. The fragment, in this analysis, acts as a kind of lure, an invitation to pause and stay with difference.

If this is in part about immersion in difference, there is of course a history of doing this in urban thought. We might think, for example, of Walter Benjamin's literary form of connecting fragments of

text, and of abandoned or usually ignored parts of the city, and assembling them in montage. *The Arcades Project* - a form that has had widespread influences in spatial and urban thinking (eg Buck-Morss,1989; Pred, 2000; Swanton, 2010) – is a strategy of "blind immersion in the particular" (Tiedemann, 2008: 247-8), and a "blasting apart of pragmatic historicism – grounded, as this always is, on the premise of a continuous and homogenous temporality" (Eiland and McLaughlin, 2003: xi) The question, one which Benjamin repeatedly examined in his writing and in his reflections on how he wrote, is whether and how fragments on the margins of urban studies may provoke new ways of conceptualising urban space, or urban politics, or urban knowledge. We cannot know the answer to such a question in advance: the force of the fragment, from a subaltern studies imagination, is to ask the question again and again, and to look for where the question pushes us as we conduct urban research.

The challenge goes to the heart of long-standing debate in urban studies about how we should understand particular cases of difference in relation to the wider whole. So, in the Lefebvrian tradition, the insistence is that analytically and politically urban scholars must shift from narrating fragmentation to critically engaging with the whole, even if the whole cannot be understood without understanding fragmentation. Here, it is never enough just to document fragments, which analytically take the form of 'end products' (quite different from the Gramscian promise of subaltern fragments that might take on a unified force, where fragments are a starting point not an end point). Instead, fragments need to be understood as both spatial *products* in cities and *processes* of fragmentation historically shaped through capitalist urbanization (the whole). Fragments, here, do not lose their specificity – it would be impossible to read Lefebvre, for instance, and conclude that he bypasses the specificity of fragments as products – but they are always being analytically resolved into a larger whole. How might this approach sit with the kind of work that would seek to stay with the fragments as provocations to different kinds of thinking?

There is no single answer here. But in some quarters of urban studies, there is at least a degree of caution in finding 'catalysts' (to use Pieterse' term) in spaces often marginal to critical urban thinking, often spaces in the global South. In a recent intervention in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Michael Storper and Allan Scott (2014) address this directly. They assert that urban studies needs to "guard against over-hasty impulses to take certain dramatic or peculiar instances of urban development (e.g. the crumbling infrastructure and violence of Kinshasa, the extensive slums of Mumbai, or the current financial collapse of Southern European cities) as *prima facie* evidence that a reformulation of theory is required". Now, as a general intellectual strategy, it is of course important to take heed of what Storper and Scott are saying here. It would be wrong, in any context (not just in

relation to fragments of space in Southern Europe or Africa or South Asia!), to make 'over-hasty' claims about needing to reformulate theory. It would be difficult to find any critical urban researcher who would disagree with that.

However, it is worth paying attention to the language used by Storper and Scott here, and what it reveals about the power to represent and to act as representative. "Guard against" – who should do the guarding? Who gets to say they are guardians? "Peculiar instances" – peculiar to whom? From which location is some urbanism deemed odd and others, implicitly, familiar? A central contribution of subaltern studies is precisely to draw attention to the privilege and power relations of location and authorship (*author*ity). This is precisely the kind of thinking – where 'thinking' is both conceptualisation and the institutional infrastructures of privilege and location that structure it – that Chakrabarty calls into question in his claims around the fragment. Might it be possible that the very capacity to define 'peculiar' instances as peculiar is precisely what the fragment as a conceptual provocation seeks to question? Might it be that what we need to 'guard against', to use Storper and Scott's terms, is not impulses to theorise from the (presumably rather weird) urbanisms of, say, Bombay's slums (and who in their right mind would do *that*?!), but the claims by the self-appointed guardians for what constitutes normal and peculiar urbanisms? Might it also be possible that one of the imperatives of subaltern studies is precisely to trouble at divide between 'conceptual' and 'empirical', not to attempt to naively bypass that divide but to transgress it by identifying how empirical particularities may also act conceptually, as provocations?

From this perspective, it seems, there are too many fragments. Weird fragments of slums and infrastructure in cities away from the Euro-American heartlands (Cf Robinson 2006, and in fact the whole postcolonial project – Roy, 2015), and fragments of theory itself – postcolonial this, poststructural that.... Storper and Scott worry over what they call a "sense of fragmentation" in urban studies. They bemoan an "ever-widening discontinuity and disjuncture in the conceptual frameworks, questions and methodologies that dominate research". There is no, they go on, "general concept of the urban and urbanization", no "shared vocabulary" to reveal its "inner logic". Fragments, whether they are empirical realities, conceptual provocations, or theoretical insights that differ from the historical theorisations we've inherited in urban studies, pose a challenge to urban studies. But the solution cannot be a drive to consensus about what the urban is. The fact that there are radical differences around what the urban or urbanization or city is, or about how to theorise and research it, is not a crisis to fret over and to resolve through the formulations of disciplinary grandees. Instead, it is something to embrace.

Rather than attempting to resolve how can we find an 'inner logic' we might more productively reflect on what is at stake in different characterisations of fragments and wholes, and critically debate the stakes of different claims about fragments in their different forms (empirical, conceptual, theoretical). This I think is the spirit with which subaltern studies embraces – again, in often hotly contested debate – the fragment. The fragment operates here in a double sense. It is a thing in the world, but it is also a provocation to how we understand knowledge or politics or history or space. As a short-hand, I will refer to this sense of the fragment as a 'subaltern studies imagination'.

Urban fragments and the subaltern studies imagination

In archival research, 'locating' evidence of subalternity is to find a glimpse of those without identity, in the sense that they or their ways of knowing and being can only be noticed rather than understood by mainstream forms of conceptualising or mainstream regimes of political power (Jazeel, 2014, 2015; Legg, forthcoming). If in archival research the fragment - subaltern or not - appears as a clue in state archival documents, or a description of a space that is beyond regulation and recognition, in urban research the fragment appears in different ways. For example, it may appear as a form of politics that offers a challenge, yet to be realised, to existing debates on urban politics, or as a way of expressing the significance of political struggle that jars with existing ways of explaining the nature of struggle. Some urban research will seek out urban fragments, subaltern or otherwise, and some will stumble across them; some accounts will seek to incorporate the fragment into a whole of some form, others will seek to find in the fragment itself an insight into a whole, and others still will seek to stay with the fragment without speaking to something 'bigger'.

A fragment, in this reading, may be a marginalised space or group that is regularly identifiable but has not yet been taken seriously as a challenge to conventional ways of conceptualising and researching. The figure of the 'peasant', in the historical archive, *may* appear to the researcher as a subaltern fragment in the sense that elements of that figure require different forms of conceptualisation and thinking, for instance in the importance of spirituality to conceptions of the political in colonial India and the intersections between those conceptions and particular notions of 'modernity' (e.g Chakrabarty, 2002; Chatterjee, 1993, 2004, 2011; Shah, 2010). But it may also appear as a non-subaltern fragment in the sense that it is identified, partially understood and debated but not granted the level of appreciation that does justice to it in the production of historical scholarship. The fact that subaltern studies scholars, and those influenced by them, have moved between both these positions in their different definitions of 'subaltern' is partly why the term has become so uncertain.

As Spivak (2005) has argued, the subaltern is difficult to discern in dominant ways of knowing because such forms of knowing are themselves constituted by non-recognition: it is not simply that they don't record the subaltern, but that they are structured as a way of seeing and knowing that makes them unable to recognize and record the subaltern. A fragment may take this form, but it does not *only* refer to that which is beyond recognition. Some fragments are easily identifiable as such, and some – subaltern fragments – are merely detectable by existing approaches but cannot be identified and understood. Importantly, however, *both* kinds of fragments may require in different ways new forms of theorisation, whether in radically translating existing conceptions or developing new forms of conceptualisation and methodology. For example, understandings of the production of infrastructure in various parts of the urban global South have challenged urban researchers to rethink the basis upon which infrastructure becomes politicised, especially in delinking politicisation from narratives of privatisation and breakdown, but these are not on the whole subaltern fragments (e.g. Chattopadhyay, 2012; Graham and McFarlane, 2014; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Simone, 2009, 2014; McFarlane, 2011).

The fragment is not the same as the particular, but names what is abstracted from the particular. The fragment then speaks in different ways beyond the particular: whether in the hands of Lefebvre (as part of a whole), Benjamin (as revelatory of a wider truth), or Chakrabarty (as a critique of what the whole stops us seeing and as a generative space of new ways of knowing or conceiving politics, history, etc). In other words, the fragment is related in different ways to the idea of the whole, which is first and foremost a question of how the fragment functions as an abstraction. Given this location to the whole, the forming of the fragment as an abstraction is a process that occurs within certain power relations. The fragment takes on its identity *as* a fragment by virtue of how it is placed either within or apart from the whole, and the act of shifting the fragment beyond mere empirical particularity through abstraction is then an act of critique of how the whole is understood.

Abstraction entails establishing a connection or rapport across different cases, comparatively or through a revelatory insight or a provocative juxtaposition that is not carried through into a formal comparison. Drawing on Isobel Stengers (2008), Derek McCormack (2012) shows how some forms of abstraction operate not simply as generalisations, but as lures that draw attention to something that matters. He calls for "greater attention to the generative role that abstraction plays in disclosing and giving consistency to different kinds of worlds" (*ibid*. 727).

In beginning to develop a subaltern studies imagination of urban fragments, this question of abstraction-as-lure is useful. A critical sense that there is something important not being seen and said, or being actively prevented from being seen and said by histories of representation and power,

is at the heart of the subaltern project. It is in this sense that a lure to something that seems to matter operates as a useful analytical strategy of the fragment. The spaces that Pieterse signposts as potential 'catalysts' to a different urban knowledge – the slum, the taxi rank, the mosque, the garbage ground, and so on – are fragments in a conceptual rather than strictly empirical sense, in that they act as lures to something that matters. Why lures? Because they have yet to be adequately appreciated in the histories of urban thought. But the lure to spaces marginal to theory need not be the spaces of the impoverished and dispossessed or Chakrabarty's terms, 'episodic' fragments. Fragments have, then, no pre-given geography. They may be found in the contemporary city or in the archive, and while in much of my discussion in this chapter I have mentioned cities in South Asia or Africa, fragments may be found in all sorts of cities across the global South and North. What marks out a fragment as such is its marginal relation to how the city is understood, a marginal relation that is also a relation of power, given that the focus of attention in any disciplinary endeavour reflects particular ways of seeing and narrativising the world.

A subaltern studies imagination rejects the idea that research can or should be judged in relation to a narrow range of abstractions of generalisation, universalism and particularism, where 'higher level' forms of abstraction are privileged as more powerful. It does not predetermine the potential 'reach' of a fragment. Reaching out beyond empirical cases, the fragment is an uncertain, searching and challenging provocation that may form new abstractions and ways of seeing. In other words, insight into the whole may come as much from fragments as from well-heeled generalisations.

In a subaltern studies imagination of the fragment, marginal spaces are cast not as peculiarities but as challenges to existing forms of conceptualisation and methodology: do we need to translate, rethink, or generate anew existing conceptualisations or methodological approaches to better understand this fragment? Theoretical pluralism is not an unfortunate outcome of this process but a necessary one: it reflects the multiplicity and often jarringly incommensurable nature of an urban world, not a crisis in consensus of consensus or an inability to identify generalised processes. A subaltern studies imagination is not a position that is against generalisation. Generalisation is another form of abstraction, based on identifying logics, processes or forms that translate and reshape across space which have a certain degree of irrefutable evidential base. The form of abstraction relevant to the fragment is different in that it seeks to take the messages from an empirical moment to speak out, as a process of dialogic translation, from an empirical moment to other logics, forms and processes in different parts of the urban world. Here, abstraction is that which exceeds the particular but which is not necessarily 'general'. A subaltern studies imagination of abstraction entails a certain style or

atmosphere of urban studies – a generative openness to the epistemic and methodological challenge and possibilities of marginal spaces, a recognition that urban multiplicity, translation and incommensurability necessitates theoretical experimentation and difference, and a recognition of the need for generalisation but with a desire to stay with and listen to the fragment longer than we might otherwise do.

Mobilising the urban fragment

In this chapter I have sought to extend the dialogue between subaltern studies and urban studies through the idea of the fragment. While the fragment is important in different ways to both sets of debates, there has been little consideration of what a subaltern studies imagination of the fragment might bring to urban research. This is not a straightforward conversation. Identifying fragments in archival research, for instance, is not the same process as identifying fragments in urban space, not least because urban space continually presents a more multiple set of prompts that compete for our attention and which challenge our systems of representation. There is, of course, a great deal more thinking to do to arrive at new ways of conceiving and researching fragments. What I have attempted is to point out that subaltern studies offers some useful resources here, resources that challenge some traditions of thinking and researching fragment-whole relations in urban studies while providing useful development to others. To ignore the possibilities of a subaltern studies imagination of the fragment, as part of a wider effort to think fragments and their relations to urban knowledge, would be a missed opportunity for urban researchers.

As a starting point, two steps are especially important in bringing a subaltern studies imagination to urban fragments. The first is the recognition that constructions of the urban whole involve a set of power relations that can exclude, subordinate or otherwise transform fragments. A key insight of the critical work on nationalism, history and fragments in India from scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey is that that fragments are produced as such because of conceptual power relations that either entails ways of seeing that excluded other knowledge-forms (such as those around spirituality), or which actively subordinate other ways of being and knowing through incorporation (e.g. of Dalits), or which serves to justify different forms of violence (e.g. against Muslims). The first step then is one of recognition that fragments are produced as fragments because of systems of representation that are also systems of power, and it is for this reason that slums for instance remain not only relatively marginal to the construction of most urban theory but in some, albeit rare, cases, received as ‘peculiar’.

The second step relates to the potential of the fragment as an abstraction, ie. as more than just the empirical particularity that constructions of the whole may imply. Here, the fragment is a form of experimentation, where experimentation derives from speculating rather than incorporating. There are different ways in which we might begin to explore analytical strategies for thinking about the fragment. For example, in montage the analytical strategy is one of juxtaposition of different renderings of urban life, and this is linked in particular to Walter Benjamin. Or, as a lure, the fragment is an invitation to speculative thought, requiring a pause to dwell with something that appears to offer something that matters for how we represent the urban world but which lies at the edges of those ways of representing. A research agenda around urban fragments would require an elaboration of these and other forms of analytical strategies. What I hope to have opened out here is the productive contribution that subaltern studies can make to this effort. Such fragments have the potential to act as moments of disruption; knowledge-forms that take the shape of an event that challenges understanding and theory, and which potentially go further in translating existing knowledge or prompting new ways of knowing urbanism.

In closing, I want to highlight two other issues that are important to a research agenda of urban fragments: first, on the implications for the imaginary of urban studies as a field; and, second, for the role of translation and incommensurability in urban theorisation. First, from the perspective of the subaltern studies imagination of the fragment outlined here, urban studies is not a field to be narrowed around shared definitions, vocabularies and inner logics. It is an expanding set of conceptual fragments, some of which articulate at certain times, some of which contradict one another. An urban studies, then, without a consensus on what urbanism is, or on what urban politics is, or on what urban space is – an urban studies, in short, inherently open, experimental and generative around the very question of '*what is*'. Or, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2011: 356) has put it in a different context, an urban studies centered – or, perhaps more accurately, decentered – on how "the acknowledgement of multiple realities - visible and invisible - means that the urban is always 'slipping away' from us, always also somewhere else than where we expect it to be". This does not mean, of course, that it is not possible to make general claims about what cities are today or how urbanism operates, why it takes the shape it does, or around how we might respond. However, it does mean that not only are these questions understood in a context of radical openness to revision through fragments, but that fragments themselves are at least as important, if not more so, than the generalities and systematisations through which urbanism is often understood.

Second, and following this, the mode of theorisation of urban fragments is attuned to notions of translation and incommensurability. As Roy (2011) has argued, it is important that marginalised or

subaltern spaces are not theorised simply within preconceived parameters, such as the informal settlement or the megacity, given that such moves reinstate the false notion of the slum or the megacity as possessing unique forms of urbanism. Fragments need not be restricted to what Roy calls the 'habitus of the dispossessed', but may provide pointers, as they are translated in the process of abstraction, to better understand urban practices in quite different domains, from planning and the state to the operations of global movements and markets (and, conversely, see Simone, 2009, 2014, on redeploying grammars of financial capital for understanding ordinary urban spaces). For example, improvised forms of politics, housing or infrastructure in informal settlements in Mumbai may help clarify the nature of improvised economies and housing left in the wake of austerity urbanism in Western cities, or shed new light on the long histories of experimental urban squatting witnessed in Amsterdam, Berlin or Copenhagen, or provide resources for understanding the calculations that increasingly constitute the everyday lives of British families dependent on urban food banks, or develop better understandings of new ways of organising relatively wealthy neighbourhoods in Mumbai and elsewhere (e.g. see Lisa Bjorkman, forthcoming, on water in Mumbai). In each of these moves, the translation of fragments as they are abstracted from particular empirical contexts is a vital process, requiring care and focus on what, if anything, a fragment may offer for understanding quite different places and processes.

By incommensurability, I am referring not just to the sense that urban politics or cultures might take radically different forms in different parts of the world, but to the sense that there is no one particular way of thinking about the nature of urbanism, the city, urbanization, urban politics, urban space, and so on. Neither fragments themselves, nor ways of thinking about them, are homogeneous. All knowledge of the urban, and the locations from which knowledge is produced and the routes through which it is composed, however revelatory and important, is provisional and limited. This is not, again, to reject the need for grand narratives, or for generalisations. Generalised abstractions, such as the increasingly global nature of processes like neoliberalism in the shaping of cities, are not just inevitable, but essential. They help us to locate resonances in processes shaping urban space and politics, identify shifts in multiple locations, and provide framings through which to build comparative research. They can also, of course, stifle the capacity of other explanations or concepts to survive and thrive. Neoliberalism is particularly adept at this precisely because of the hybrid, contingent and changing form that critics attribute it – it can gather just too much up into its explanatory frame. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued (2002), it surely cannot be the business of theorists to seek out grounds to *reject* such macrological explanations of globality, but instead to look *for the grounds upon which we can accept them* in any particular context, i.e. around whether and how, and through which translations, we might put them to use. This means acknowledging that however global its reach, and

despite the fact that neoliberalism could hardly be described as a fragment, it is nonetheless limited: its operation in some contexts may be one of translation through different fragments, in others it may be incommensurable with other fragments that are more important in producing and contesting urban space (Bunnell, 2013; Parnell and Robinson, 2012). As Spivak (1993: 60) has put it, this entails saying an "impossible 'no' to a structure [of explanation], which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately".

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